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THE BUDDHA

By Ven. Narada Mahathera

he Buddha was a unique Being. He was the profoundest of thinkers, the most persuasive of speakers, the most energetic of workers, the most successful of reformers, the most compassionate and tolerant of teachers, the most efficient of administrators. The most notable characteristic of the Buddha was His absolute purity and perfect holiness. He was so pure and so holy that He should be called "**The Holiest of Holies.**" He was the perfect model of all the virtues He preached. On no occasion did the Buddha manifest any moral weakness. Everybody that came in contact with Him acknowledged His indisputable greatness and was deeply influenced by His magnetic personality.

His will, wisdom, compassion, service, renunciation, exemplary personal life, the blameless methods that were employed to propagate the Dhamma, and His final success – all these factors have contributed to hail the

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Buddha as the greatest religious Teacher.

The Buddha was the first most active missionary in the world. He wandered from place to place for forty-five years preaching His doctrine to the masses and the intelligentsia. Till His last moment, He served humanity both by example and by precept. His distinguished disciples followed suit. Penniless, they even travelled to distant lands to propagate the Dhamma, expecting nothing in return.

“Strive on with diligence”, were the last words of the Buddha. No emancipation or purification can be gained without personal striving. As such petitional or intercessory prayers are denounced in Buddhism and in their stead is meditation which leads to self-control, purification, and enlightenment. The object of the Buddha’s mission was to deliver beings from suffering by eradicating its cause and to teach a way to put an end to both birth and death if one wishes to do so. Incidentally, however, the Buddha has expounded discourses which tend to worldly progress. Both material and spiritual progress are essential for the development of a nation. One should not be separated from the other, nor should material progress be achieved by sacrificing spiritual progress as is to be witnessed today among materialistic-minded nations in the world.

Pandit Nehru often referred to the Buddha as the greatest son of India. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, another Indian leader and a philosopher, in paying a glowing tribute to the Buddha states:

“In Gotama Buddha we have a mastermind from the East second to none as far as the influence on the thought and life of the human race is concerned, and sacred to all as the founder of a religious tradition whose hold is hardly less wide and deep than any other. He belongs to the history of the world’s thought, to the general inheritance of all cultivated men, for judged by intellectual integrity, moral earnestness and spiritual insight, the Buddha is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in history.”

In ‘**The Three Greatest Men in History**’, historian H.G. Wells writes:

“In the Buddha you see clearly a man – simple, devout, lonely, battling for light – a vivid human personality, not a myth. He too had a message to mankind universal in character. Many of our best modern ideas are in closest harmony with it. All the miseries and discontents are due, He taught, to selfishness. Before a man can become serene he must cease to live for his senses or himself. Then he merges into a great being. The Buddha in a different language called men to self-forgetfulness 500 years before Christ. In some ways the Buddha is nearer to us and our needs. He was more lucid upon our individual importance, sacrifice and service than Christ and less ambiguous upon the question of personal immortality.”

The Buddha was indeed a man but an extraordinary man. As a Buddha he was not born but he made himself so. He perceived the latent possibilities and creative power of man and without arrogating to himself to divinity advised his followers to emulate him, for Buddhahood is latent in all.

The Buddha is venerated by his followers as their supreme moral teacher but he is never worshipped as a god expecting worldly or spiritual favours. The Buddha left no room whatsoever for his devout adherents to deify him. Nevertheless, it should be remarked that there was no moral teacher who was “so godless as the Buddha yet so God-like”. Bertrand Russell rightly calls the Buddha “the greatest atheist of all times.”

But atheism should not be misconstrued as synonymous with irreligiousness. To establish genuine peace and happiness amongst mankind, a sincere religious awakening is absolutely necessary in this morally bankrupt world. What is of importance is not mere faith in dogmatic creeds or mere observance of rites and ceremonies, beneficial as they are for the masses, but a clean and useful life of love, reason and justice based on the noble principles of their respective teachers.

Prof. Joad says that “in the sixth century BC there arose in India and China three great teachers who tried to make men understand that it was important to do what was right for its own sake quite apart from whether there was a God or not; among them the most important was

Gotama the Buddha."

The Buddha did emphasize the importance of morals as a means to an end. He counselled that we should exercise right thoughts of selflessness, loving kindness and harmlessness; right speech that enables one to control one's mischievous tongue; right action by refraining from killing men or animals, from stealing by direct or indirect means and from sexual misconduct; and, right livelihood which should be free from exploitation, misappropriation or any other illegal means of acquiring wealth or property. These form the foundations of morality.

The Buddha addressed his noble message of selfless service, morality and boundless loving kindness not only to kings, princes, nobles and millionaires but also to the poor, lowly and needy. He provided equal opportunities for all and enhanced the status of people. He declared that the road to spiritual development is open to all in every condition of life, high or low, saint or sinner, who would care to turn a new leaf and seek perfection.

Daily the Buddha preached to both monks and the laity. What he taught was however an infinitesimal part of what he knew. On one occasion the Buddha took a handful of leaves and said that what he taught was comparable to the leaves in his hand; what he did not teach was comparable to the amount of leaves in the forest. He taught only what is necessary for our deliverance.

In his daily routine, he looked up individuals who

needed his help; he instructed and exhorted his ordained disciples who flocked to hear him and he even expounded dhamma to the gods (*devas*). He taught dhamma to the masses and the intellectuals; his teachings in fact contained milk for the babe and meat for the adult. Before he preached, the Buddha saw to it that the hungry were fed, as food for the body is as essential as food for the mind. He ministered the sick with his own hands and declared "he who ministers unto the sick ministers unto me."

The Buddha established a classless society by opening the gates of the Sangha to all deserving individuals, making no distinction between caste or class. The only distinction was in the seniority of the ordination like novices (*samanera*), monks (*bhikkhus*), *theras* and *mahatheras* and the gradual achievement of the four supramundane paths. *Sangharajas* and *Nayaka Theras* were later innovations. Even the constitution of the Sangha was democratically constituted. In this connection Lord Zetland says, "And it may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the assemblies of the Buddhists in India two thousand years and more ago are to be found the rudiments of our Parliamentary practice of the present day."

Likewise, for the first time in history the Buddha founded the religious order of nuns for women, irrespective of class or caste. He thus gave equality to womanhood for spiritual development.

The Buddha was also the first in known history to

attempt to abolish slavery by introducing the concept of brotherhood and dignity of mankind. The Buddha preached against the sacrifice of unfortunate animals as offerings and brought them within the ambit of loving kindness. A genuine Buddhist practises loving kindness towards every living being, making no distinction whatsoever.

It is loving kindness that should form the basis for a brotherhood of nations, or a religious brotherhood that should break down all barriers separating one nation from another or one religious calling from another. If followers of different faiths cannot or will not meet on a common platform like brothers and sisters simply because they belong to different religions then surely the noble religious teachers would have failed in their noble mission for the cause of humanity.

The Buddha was absolutely tolerant. Intolerance is the greatest enemy of religion. The Buddha therefore advised his disciples not to become angry, discontented or even displeased when others spoke ill of him, his teachings or his monks. "If you show displeasure," said the Buddha, "you will not only bring yourselves into danger of spiritual loss but you will not be able to judge whether what others say is correct or otherwise." "A most enlightened sentiment, even after 2,500 years of enlightenment", said Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.

The Buddha expounded no dogmas which one must blindly believe, no creed or faith which one must accept without reasoning, no superstitious rites and ceremonies

to be observed for formal entry into the fold, and no meaningless sacrifices and penances for one's purification. The Buddha presented simple truths to the masses and profound philosophical teachings to the intellectuals. He advised seekers of truth not to accept anything on the authority of another but to exercise their own reasoning and to judge for themselves whether it is right or wrong.

During the peaceful march of His teaching for 2,500 years, not a single drop of blood was shed in the propagation of the dhamma, and no conversion was ever made by force or repulsive methods. Yet the Buddha was the first and greatest missionary who ever lived on earth.

The Buddha's sublime teaching has spread and is still making peaceful inroads into more and more countries in the world owing to its rationality, practicability, efficacy, non-aggressiveness, tolerance and universality. The Buddha-dhamma has contributed greatly to the cultural advancement of many Asian countries. In fact, all Buddhist countries grew up in the cradle of Buddhism.

Nations have come and gone, empires founded on might and force have flourished and perished but the empire of the dhamma founded by the Buddha, on love, compassion and reason, still flourishes and will continue to flourish. ■